

## Crossing the line: Sexual harassment in physical therapy

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### Abstract

Sexual harassment is a situation in which one party sexually imposes itself on another party without that party's consent. It can be directed towards and initiated by both sexes, and may involve actions or behaviors that occur physical proximity or remotely.

Sexual harassment in the health care professions can be initiated by the patient or the therapist, and may also occur between co-workers. Physical therapy treatments often involve multiple sessions delivered over long periods of time. These sessions includes verbal instructions as well as physical contact, affecting the physical as well as the emotional status of the patient. These characteristics may blur the patient-therapist boundaries, and create situations that may be experienced by the patient or therapist as sexual harassment.

According to the literature, sexual harassment in the physical therapy treatment settings is under-reported. The codes of behavior are not always clear, and there is insufficient reference to the subject in studies and professional training.

The Law for the Prevention of Sexual Harassment, enacted in 1998, defines seven types of acts that are considered sexual harassment. Offenders can receive criminal, civil, and/or disciplinary charges, and the punishment may include imprisonment and/or the suspension of one's professional licensure.

Sexual harassment during physical therapy treatment is a traumatic even for the victim, and may seriously damage the therapist-patient relationship. The present article reviews various aspects of sexual harassment within the physical therapy context, the law instituted to prevent sexual harassment, and suggests preventive measures.